DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 968 PS 022 811

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TITLE Quality of Kindergarten Education in Singapore: Parents' Views and Expectations.
PUB DATE Jun 94
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meetings of ISSBD (13th, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 29-July 2, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bilingual Education; Educational Attitudes; Educational Quality; Foreign Countries; *Kindergarten; *Parent Aspiration; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent School Relationship; Preschool Children; Preschool Education; *Preschool Evaluation; Private Education; Public Education; Socioeconomic Background
IDENTIFIERS Singapore

ABSTRACT

A study investigated parents' perceptions of the quality of kindergarten education in Singapore. Subjects (437 parents from 10 kindergartens) responded to a survey on reasons for wanting their children to attend kindergarten and their choice of kindergarten. Responses were categorized according to: (1) socioeconomic characteristics of the parents; (2) factors in the choice of kindergarten such as qualified staff, good facilities, individual attention, a strong academic program, emphasis on language learning, and a good academic reputation; (3) choice between private and government-aided kindergartens; (4) parents' reasons for sending children to kindergarten; and (5) parental expectations. Findings indicated that parents generally had a fairly definite idea of the kind of kindergarten education they wanted for their children, and revealed that: (1) parents in Singapore value kindergarten education for exposing their children to a structured learning situation; (2) all parents regarded preparing children for school (acquiring basic cognitive skills and language competencies) as the most important function of kindergarten; (3) most parents considered quality more important than personal convenience or financial commitment; (4) parents from the high SES group favored private kindergartens while those from the low SES favored government-aided kindergartens; (5) high SES parents rated cognitive skills, social skills, and discipline training as more important than did low SES parents; and (6) socioeconomic factors had varying effects on parents' kindergarten decisions and expectations. (AA)

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QUALITY OF KINDERGARTEN EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE: PARENTS' VIEWS AND EXPECTATIONS

ED 376 968

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13th Biennal Meetings of ISSBD
Amsterdam, Netherlands
29 June - 2 July 1994

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a preliminary investigation of parents' views and expectations of the quality of kindergarten education in Singapore . Specifically, it looks at the relationships between type of kindergarten chosen and socio-economic status of parents. Other variables explored include the quality of trainers, parental expectations and satisfaction and academic record of the kindergarten setting. It also looks at the impact of childrearing values and beliefs among the Malay, Chinese and Tamil ethnic parental groups on both parental expectations and choice of kindergartens.

Based on a sample of 437 parent clients from 10 kindergarten centers, the study found that parents generally from all ethnic groups, place a high value on kindergarten education. Good facilities, qualified staff and an academic-oriented program were taken as indicative of a high quality kindergarten center. The type of kindergarten was found to have some mediation effect on the level of quality parents expect of kindergarten education. There was no significant relationship linking parental views, distance and cost of kindergartens. Parental expectations were also higher from the higher socio-economic status group who rate cognitive, social skills and discipline training as important features. The implications of the findings with reference to advising parents and trainers and recommendations for further research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, rapid social transformation has taken place in Singapore and education has undergone some profound structural changes. Schooling has become more attuned to the differential aptitudes and abilities of students. However these structural changes had meant also a greater diversity and, at some level, greater complexity in terms of educational choices and opportunities . The general expectation of parents for their children's educational attainment has seemed to be rising and many are found to be concerned with the quality of education for their young.

Majority of mothers want their children to have at least a tertiary education. In some instances, the high level of parental aspiration seems to reflect an unrealistic attitude. Their high expectation has been blamed for exacerbating the educational pressure on their children. They are uncertain about the chances of their children fulfilling their wish of higher education. Working mothers feel that it is essential to stop work for 8 to 10 years in order to supervise their children's schoolwork.

At present about 82% of children aged between three and six in Singapore go to several types of kindergartens offered by the state, church groups, corporate bodies and private schools. Most of these kindergartens advocate a strong educative component in their programs. Attendance is completely voluntary and in the case of private kindergartens, expensive. The decision to make use of such facilities and services is entirely up to the parents.

The present education system in Singapore is highly structured. With increased economic affluence kindergarten attendance is regarded as an integral part of educational experiences for those who can afford. The choice of preschools presents to parents their first major educational decision for their children and such decisions reflect their aspiration and expectations. Important questions relevant to these choices and decision need to be asked and answered in order to have an understanding of the broader social ramifications that the new education system may have for both preschoolers and their parents.

METHOD

437 parents from 10 kindergartens responded to a survey form which consisted of questions covering their choice and reasons for wanting their children to attend kindergartens. Their views and expectations were also included in the form . Fifty parents were selected for a follow up interview.

The questionnaire was conceptualised with reference to the four basic research questions: Who sent their children to which kindergartens: What factors did these parents consider when choosing the present kindergartens: Why did they want their children to attend kindergartens and What sort of expectations did they have of kindergartens with respect to their children's education.

FINDINGS

In order to present the general trend of the choices and expectations of parents with regard to kindergarten education in the social context of Singapore, a comparison of three social groups, the high, medium and low socio-economic status groups will form the framework of the analysis. Data having a direct bearing on the four research questions will be shown.

Socio-economic characteristics of the parents

The target population for this study consists of parents with at least one child already enrolled in a kindergarten. Kindergarten education in Singapore is non-compulsory and comparatively expensive and these parents are generally above the average national socio-economic status level. To determine the socio-economic status, three indicators are used in this study : occupation, father's education and household income. A comparison between the surveyed parents and the general population in terms of occupational status is shown in Table 1.

A few observations can be made. The parents surveyed belong to the higher occupational status largely from the professional and administrative levels. The sales workers are over-represented and this could be accounted for by the employment status of many of these parents. A large proportion belonged to the traditional small-time businessmen, such as shop-proprietors or stall keepers, many of whom have succeeded in life through their own effort, though lacking a formal education at higher level. Kindergarten education has become very much a middle-class phenomenon in Singapore. Table 2 shows the income (Singapore dollars) levels attained by the surveyed parents as against the national population. The fairly well educated parents have placed a high value on kindergarten education for their children.

Important factors in the choice of kindergartens

What factors did parents consider as important in choosing the type of kindergarten for their children? All parents stressed the importance of facilities and quality of service offered by respective kindergartens, when asked for their reasons to change kindergarten. To obtain a comparative perspective of their views, the high SES group and the low SES group were compared. (see Table 3).

In choosing a kindergarten for their children, quality of service (including qualified staff, good facilities, individual attention for children, a strong academic programme, emphasis on language learning and a good academic reputation) was the main concern of parents irrespective of their socio-economic status. For the high SES group, an additional factor was their expressed concern for the social development of their children in terms of exposure to group life. Distance and cost were not so important.

A general pattern of those factors considered as important by parents from different SES backgrounds is shown in Table 4. For parents from the low SES group, distance was important because it could imply additional finance and responsibility. Over 60% of parents from the high SES group expressed their concern over good facilities especially the indicator of academic excellence. For them this was an important index of the credibility of that particular kindergarten.

In Singapore, kindergarten programs run in sessions each of which averages about three hours. There could be as many as three sessions a day for some kindergartens. Together with distance, the time schedule of kindergarten could pose real problems for some parents who had to rely on outside family help to bring their children to the centers. Where finance was not a problem, the assistance of a domestic maid could be obtained without too much difficulty. it was a small price parents in Singapore were more than prepared to pay for the educational benefit of their children.

Choosing between privately run and government aided kindergartens

There are noticeable differences between parents who chose either privately run or government aided kindergartens.(see Table 5). For those parents who chose private kindergartens, as high as 62% considered qualified staff as important, as compared with only 39% who chose government-aided kindergartens. Parents from the higher SES groups view good facilities of the kindergarten centers as more important than parents from the lower SES group. Good facilities would mean a higher fee charged by kindergartens which were run without the benefit of public funding. Parents who were prepared to pay more for their children's education would expect better facilities. 79% of parents who chose private kindergarten considered this factor important as compared with 40% of parents who chose the government aided kindergartens.

The emphasis on an academic curriculum in Singapore's schools is very strong and this is reflected even at kindergarten levels. Almost as much as three times of parents who chose private kindergartens considered this factor as important.(61% compared with 24%) Privately run kindergartens could be regarded as a wholly self subsidised enterprise, with minimum control and monitoring by the licensing body over the management and design of programs. These kindergartens had to regulate its own operation and compete on their own terms. A good academic curriculum would be a credit to the kindergarten concerned. Most parents interested in the cognitive development of their children at this level would find such a reputation a good index of the content and quality of programs offered.

The high charges of private kindergarten pose no barrier to parents who had decided to send their children there, for a low 7% of parents indicated that they ever considered this as an important factor. The SES status of parents seemed to have no impact on their perception, once the type of kindergarten was decided upon. However, distance was perceived differently. As high as 85% of parents who chose the government run kindergartens considered distance or nearness as important. Government run kindergartens have sprung up in many areas of Singapore as part of a bigger social program to bring community and educational services to the mass population through their strategic location. Distance in this instance could well imply, at least for the parents, a big savings on time and cost.

Reasons for sending children to kindergartens

Many parents in Singapore regard kindergarten education as a logical downward extension of educational experience for children before the legal age of six for primary schooling. Table 6 sums up the responses of parents to six reasons why they send their children to kindergartens.It was revealing that parents, regardless of their social position had an almost unanimous agreement on the preschool preparation for primary school as an important reason to send their children to kindergartens. This was followed by their desire for their children to mix with other children of their age. More parents from the higher SES groups indicated so, with an average of 90% as against 67% from the low SES group. Parents from these groups had a more balanced view on the cognitive and social needs of their children.

About 60% of parents from the high SES group also felt the social pressure to enrol their children in kindergartens so that they would not lose out to other children, while 37% of parents from the low SES group indicated likewise. Apparently, the financial position of the low SES parents would have made them less susceptible to social pressure while the status pressure had more influence on the high SES parents. The custodial function of kindergarten was of minimal importance to most of the parents surveyed.

Parents in Singapore have certainly placed a high value on education for their children, to the extent that they were prepared to make adjustment in their life-style so that the children's educational needs could be met. As much as 75% of parents in the survey indicated their willingness to tolerate a fee increase up to 30% of the current rates in all kindergartens. Kindergarten attendance had been increasing and this was discernible in the parents' efforts to secure a head-start advantage for their children.

Parental Expectations of Kindergarten Education

The role and function of kindergarten are subject to different interpretations by parents from their respective social positions. What did parents in the Singapore context expect kindergartens to do for their children? Six dimensions of the function of kindergarten education had been identified for this study. Parents were asked to respond to a series of opinion statements on specific tasks related to each of these dimensions. A comparison of parents' views was carried out on the basis of their socio-economic status and the type of kindergarten they had chosen for their children. The six dimensions were cognitive skills, social skills, self-development, child-oriented program and organisation, discipline training and, finally, learner's role preparation.

Tables 7 and 8 show the parents' responses by their socio-economic status and the individual items in each dimension. It appeared that parents were concerned with three major aspects of children's growth : cognitive skills, self development and discipline training. Parents certainly expected kindergartens to teach their children basic reading, writing and counting skills. They also expected kindergartens to teach children independence by doing more for themselves and taking care of their belongings. Discipline training had often been stressed as an important part of the educative process for young children by the Chinese. In this case, parents expressed strong agreement to the need for children to be taught to abide by rules and to obey their teachers.

More high SES parents stressed the need for children to learn social skills such as working with other adults. They also encouraged child-oriented activities and programs in kindergartens. However all parents had a desire for their children a headstart in the training of specific skills and appropriate self-discipline within a semi-formal setting. This trend of placing a premium on kindergarten education as a preparatory stage will continue among parents in Singapore, given a social structure which places such a high value on education.

Parental ambition for their children is greatly reinforced by their perception of the opportunities available for their children. The match between parents' educational aspiration and their actual expectation for their children were much more positive for the higher SES groups.(see Table 9) The gap between aspiration and expectation in respect of children's education was biggest among parents of low SES. 89% of high SES parents were confident that their children would attain the desired university education. Less than 25% of the low SES parents expected their children to reach the university level.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions regarding parental choice and expectation of kindergarten education in the context of Singapore society could be drawn from the study. However, interpretation of these findings requires caution and a sensitivity to the constantly changing factors influencing the present survey.In the midst of rapid social changes, perception and expectation of the role of education by parents have also been changing correspondingly. In the case of Singapore, the close link of education to the structure of labour market and subsequently to the economic framework, operating in a fluid socio-cultural context, has certainly accentuated the functional role of education. The utility value of education has come to be predominant among parents.

One of the functions of early childhood in relation to social needs is to provide a bridge between home and school for young children. The bridging function of kindergarten could take many forms, depending on the broader educational context in which it operates. If the education system is highly selective with restricted admission to the next higher level, the effect of selection is bound to be found to be moving downward on the rungs of the system. The function of preschool education inevitably becomes restricted to that of preparing children for the learner's role in school.

It appeared from the study that for all parents, anticipatory socialization into a learner's role for their children was uppermost in their minds when deciding on a kindergarten. The learner's role was conceptualised as possessing the necessary cognitive skills and language competency.

More specifically, the survey findings revealed that:

1. Parents in Singapore generally place a high value on education. Aspiration of a university education for their children was prevalent, transgressing social boundaries.Kindergarten education is valued for the opportunity provided for their children to be exposed to a more formally structured learning situation.

2. Preparing children for school in terms of acquiring the basic cognitive skills and language competence was regarded by all parents as the most important function of kindergarten.

3. In choice of a kindergarten for their children, most parents considered as most important the quality of service compared to personal convenience or financial commitment. Good facilities, qualified staff and an academic-oriented program were other indicators of level of quality. A higher level of quality was expected of private kindergartens.

4. Distance and cost were somewhat related, but these had different effects on parents. Parents from government aided kindergartens considered proximity as important. All parents were prepared to pay up to 30% more than the current rates for their children's attendance.

5. Parents from the high SES group had a strong preference for privately run kindergartens while parents from the low SES group favoured the government aided kindergartens.

6. Parents from the higher SES group had more definite expectations of kindergarten education for their children than those from the lower SES group. Cognitive skills, social skills and discipline training were rated as more important by high SES parents. A liberal approach to preschool education was opposed to by all parents who generally lack an understanding of the educative value behind games and play in the preschool setting.

7. Socio-economic factors of parents were found to have varying effect on their decisions and expectations about the type of kindergartens and their reasons for sending their children to these kindergartens.

In summing up, it becomes apparent that parents in Singapore generally had a fairly definite idea of the kind of kindergarten education they wanted for their children. Both the government aided and privately run kindergartens had different appeal to parents but they offered an option for parents to choose according to their expectations and resources.

As education in Singapore moved towards bilingualism with English as the predominant medium of instruction, parents have expressed concern over the learning of languages for their children. The bilingual policy in schools is well accepted and the task is left to the parents to find as much opportunity as possible for their children to acquire the two languages at a proficient level as early as possible. The government aided kindergartens were chosen by some parents because of the emphasis given on learning Mandarin. On the other hand, for the privately run kindergartens bilingualism meant a predominance of the English language but adequate attention is paid to the official second language policy. Kindergarten education could therefore offer the child without any suitable language environment at home, an early exposure to the school languages.

The language issue in education has taken on a special significance in Singapore because of her cultural and ethnic complexity. This has some implications for the direction and approach in the development of early childhood education. Kindergarten education has certainly moved beyond the custodial role and with so many children entering preschools and that number destined to grow, it seems inevitable that this role of the center will broaden and change.

(The author would like to acknowledge the help of the following people and organisation in the survey.)

Mr. Chuah Toh Chai .
Principals and supervisors
MetropolitanYMCA Child Care centers.

TABLE 1

Occupational Status of Parents in the Survey

	National Population	Parents Surveyed
Professional and technical workers	8.8 %	10.3
Administrative and managerial workers	4.8 %	7.1
Clerical workers	15.6%	7.8
Sales workers	12.3%	27.7
Service workers	10.4%	8.0
agricultural workers	1.9 %	6.9
Production and related workers	40.4%	23.3
others	-	3.2
Not classified	5.8%	-
No response	-	5.7

TABLE 2 Income Levels Between the Surveyed Parents and the National Population

Income	Status	National Population	Surveyed Parents N=437
200 and above	High	16.7%	35.0%
1000 - 1999	Medium	26.3%	27.2%
Below 1000	Low	56.6%	33.2%
No response		0.4%	4.6%

TABLE 3

Major Reasons for kindergarten Choice

	High SES	Low SES	Total
Cost	0.7%	1.3%	2.0%
Quality of Service	23.3%	44.0%	67.5%
Distance	0.7%	13.0%	13.7%
Others	8.4%	8.4%	16.8%
Total	33.1%	66.9%	100%

TABLE 4

- Factors Considered as Important in Choosing Kindergarten by Parents' SES

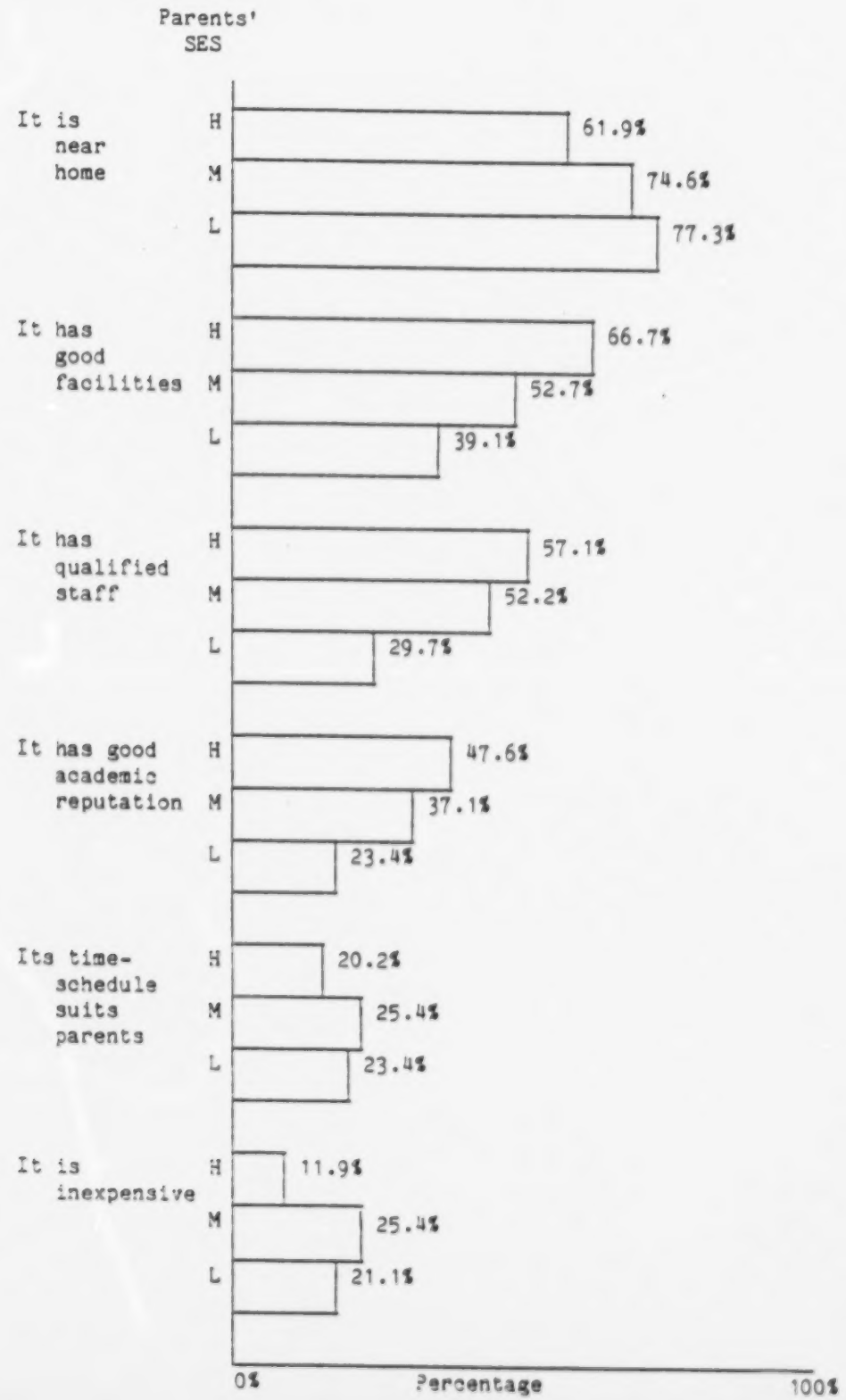

Table 5

Importance of qualified staff, good facilities academic curriculum, cost and distance by parents SES and Kindergarten choice

	Government-aided Kindergarten				Privately-run Kindergarten				intergroup chi-square
	SES				SES				
	High	Med	Low	Total	High	Med	Low	Total	
Importance of	N=31	N=124	N=104	N=259	N=51	N=62	N=9	N=122	P<.001
Qualified staff	38.7	48.4	28.8	39.4	66.6	59.7	55.5	62.3	17.2
Good facilities	48.4	40.3	36.5	39.8	78.4	80.6	66.6	78.7	.50.5
Academic Curriculum	19.4	27.4	21.1	23.9	66.6	56.4	66.6	61.4	50.4
Cost	25.8	33.1	24.1	28.6	3.9	9.7	11.2	7.4	20.58
Distance	83.9	87.1	82.7	84.9	47.1	54.8	44.4	50.8	49.9

TABLE 6

Reasons for Sending Children to Kindergarten by Parents' SES

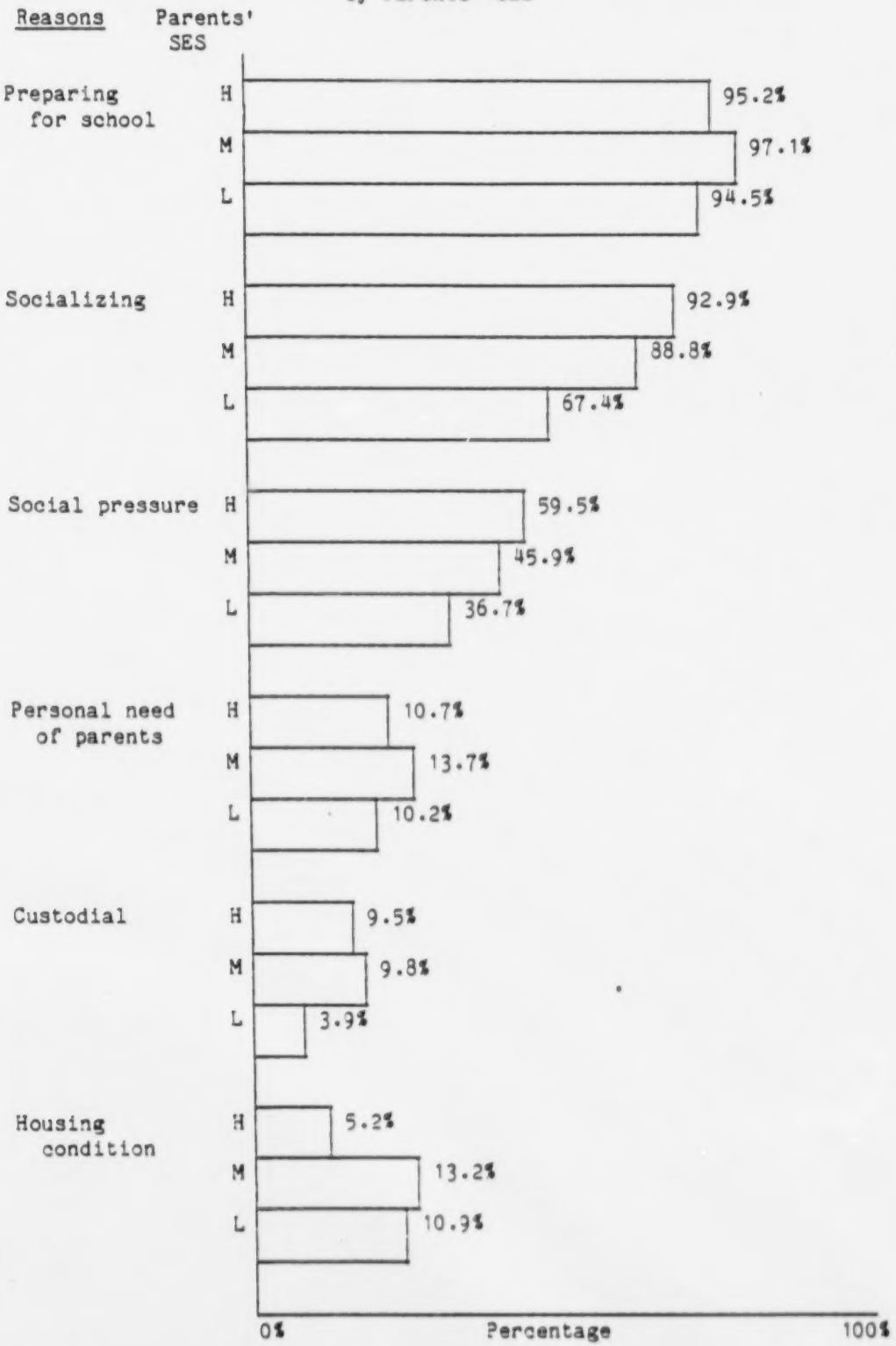

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TABLE 7

- Mean-ratings Comparison of Parents' Expectations of Kindergarten Education by Parents' SES

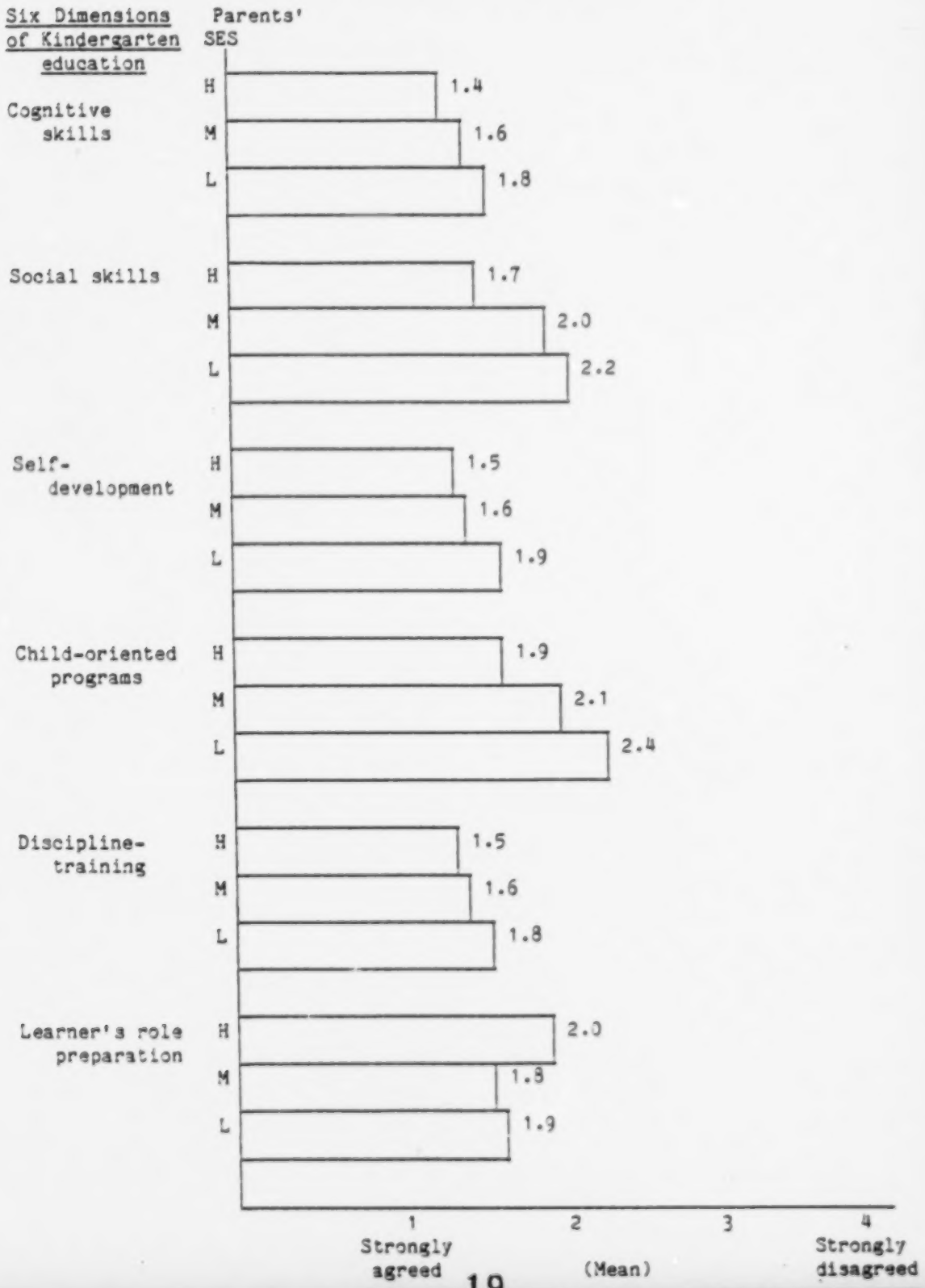

TABLE 8 Parental Expectations of Kindergarten Education by SES

Task of Kindergarten	Parents' SES					
	High		Medium		Low	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
Cognitive Skills						
Kindergarten should teach children to read	1.3	.50	1.5	.75	1.6	1.12
Kindergaten should teach children to write	1.4	.51	1.4	.52	1.6	1.12
Kindergarten should teach children to count	1.3	.48	1.5	.93	1.9	1.64
Kindergarten should teach children simple science	1.7	.63	2.0	.92	2.3	1.82
Social Skills						
Kindergarten should teach children about their social environment	1.7	.64	1.8	.60	2.2	1.61
Kindergarten should teach children to work with adult other than their own parents	1.7	.57	2.1	1.33	2.2	1.59
Self-development						
Kindergarten should teach children to take care of themselves	1.3	.54	1.5	.76	1.9	1.62
Kindergarten should teach children to ask more question about themselves	1.6	.63	1.8	1.08	2.1	1.71
Kindergarten should teach children to do more for themselves	1.5	1.02	1.6	.59	1.8	1.15

TABLE 8 (continued)

Task of Kindergarten	Parents' SES					
	High		Medium		Low	
	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev	Mean	Std Dev
Child Oriented Program						
Kindergarten should provide a lot of space for children to engage in play and activities	1.7	1.03	1.8	.88	2.4	1.80
Kindergaten should give a lot of time in its program for children to play with their age-mates	1.9	1.03	2.2	1.01	2.6	1.66
Kindergarten should give children the freedom to choose their activities	2.3	1.05	2.4	1.12	2.4	2.4
Kindergarten should encourage children to make believe during story-time	2.1	1.04	2.3	1.03	2.6	1.77
Kindergarten should provide opportunity for children to experience music and movement	1.7	.99	1.9	.92	2.2	1.67
Discipline Training						
Kindergarten should teach children to observe rules and regulations	1.5	.98	1.6	.92	1.7	1.32
Kindergarten should teach children to obey their teachers	1.6	1.29	1.6	.52	1.8	1.47
Learner's Role Preparation						
Kindergarten should set homework for children	2.4	1.05	2.0	.72	2.0	1.62
Kindergarten should prepare children for primary school	1.7	.98	1.6	.54	1.9	1.63

TABLE 9

Parents' Educational Aspiration and Expectation for Children by Father's Education

Level of Education for children	Father's Education					
	High		Medium		Low	
	Aspired (N=82)	Expected (N=78)	Aspired (N=200)	Expected (N=174)	Aspired (N=121)	Expected (N=107)
Primary	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.9%	2.8%
Secondary	0.0%	3.8%	0.5%	14.3%	10.7%	40.2%
College	1.2%	7.7%	17.5%	25.9%	19.0%	33.6%
University	98.8%	88.5%	82.0%	59.8%	69.4%	23.4%